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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Political Situation in South Vietnam: The Current
Crisis, Possible Future Developments, U.S. Options

I. THE BACKGROUND

At the present time, South Vietnam is neither a "state", in our institutional sense of the word nor -- yet -- a "nation", as we understand and define that term in the West. The Vietnamese have a keen and proud sense of shared membership in a homogenous ethnic group with a common cultural heritage stretching back for many centuries, but they have little sense of shared membership in a single body politic. Articulate and politically conscious elements within South Vietnam -- especially in the military establishment and in urban centers -- are rapidly developing a touchy sense of emotional "nationalism", which is grafted on a traditional and highly developed sense of racial pride, coupled with an equally traditional and developed instinctive dislike for foreigners. As yet, however, there is little sense of a national interest whose claims transcend those of personal ambition or ties to family, associates, region or religion.

With U.S. assistance which they welcome, recognize as essential but nonetheless also resent, non-Communist Vietnamese south of the 17th Parallel are trying simultaneously to cope with an externally directed Communist insurgency and to build something that has never existed before: an independent Vietnamese nation. This endeavor is drastically complicated by the stresses and pressures generated by the insurgency. It is also complicated by other factors: South Vietnam's political parties are all fragmented factions of what were initially clandestine revolutionary organizations. Their leaders are incorrigibly inclined to plot the overthrow of governments and reluctant to support any political structure in which they cannot have the paramount roles. There are no traditionally accepted institutions capable of providing forums for political dissent, measuring the

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relative strength of contending groups, or striking peaceful political bargains. The only organized and disciplined entity in South Vietnam presently capable of managing a government is the military establishment. In the absence of effective political institutions or organizations, religious groups provide the focal point for political sentiments. In the absence of genuine nationalism, regional ties color political emotions and are stronger than nascent higher loyalties.

For the past year South Vietnam has been ruled by a military government which has had to direct a war and, simultaneously, cope with all of the problems outlined above. At the apex of this government has been a Directory of ten generals whose most prominent members have been the Chief of State, General Thieu, and the Premier, General Ky. Neither, however, has possessed independent authority. Instead, both have only exercised power delegated by a collegium.

To survive and accomplish anything this government has had to perform a continual balancing act juggling the aspirations, claims and jealousies of southerners, centrists, and northerners, of Buddhists, of Catholics, and all the other groups who have some measure of political power in South Vietnam. It has also had to cope with civilian restiveness at continued military rule and the widespread desire among politically conscious civilian elements for the evolution of a political structure with a clearer legal title to power and a diminished degree of military authority. Furthermore, it has had to cope with the fact that the military commander of each of the four Corps areas (himself a member of the ruling Directory) is inevitably a warlord whose personal writ within his Corps is at least as strong as that of the central government. Over the past year this problem has been particularly and increasingly acute in South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces which constitute the I Corps area and have been governed by the ambitious, temperamental and sometimes unstable General Nguyen Chanh Thi.

II. THE SCENARIO

It is within this context that South Vietnam's current political crisis developed. By 9 March, General Ky had reached a decision shared by most of his Directory colleagues that the central government could no longer tolerate the Corps area satrapies best exemplified by General Thi's I Corps and, consequently, that Thi had to go. Thi

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was called to Saigon for a 10 March Directory meeting at which he was relieved of his command and told that he would be sent abroad for a period of temporary exile. General Ky had prepared his ground carefully for this meeting and was able to obtain the unanimous support of his Directory colleagues. His follow-up execution, however, was not well prepared and was not effectively carried out.

At the 10 March meeting Thi was told he could return briefly to I Corps the following day to wind up his affairs and participate in a change-of-command ceremony designed to save his face. That night, however, the Deputy Prime Minister, General Co, another powerful Directory figure, apparently had a unilateral change of mind. On the morning of the 11th, Co went to the Saigon Airport, prevented Thi from leaving, and in effect placed him under house arrest in Saigon. Five days later the Directory changed its mind again. By then the I Corps situation had begun to be troublesome and Thi was allowed to return to I Corps "for a couple of days" in the hope -- and apparently with the understanding -- that he would exert his personal influence to calm things down before leaving the country. He went back to I Corps on 16 March, is still there, and has done more to aggravate than to assuage the situation.

It was recognized that Thi's dismissal would cause some resentment in I Corps but Ky and his Directory colleagues thought they could keep matters under control. Events proved otherwise, however, for various reasons, among the most important of which are the fact that protest reaction to Thi's ouster was organized and is still directed by key GVN officials in I Corps (e.g., Nguyen Van Man, the mayor of Danang), the fact that Thi's designated successor as I Corps commander, General Chuan, has so far shown himself unable or unwilling to exert effective authority, and -- above all -- the fact that the Buddhists have seized on this opportunity to exert political pressure intended to topple the government.

It was anticipated that Thi's dismissal would be resented by the Buddhists and generate some distress in their ranks. This in fact occurred, but in short order it became apparent that the Buddhists -- particularly Tri Quang and his followers -- were not so much interested in Thi himself, with whom they had already become more or less disenchanted, as they were in the opportunity for bringing down the

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government. Their initial probes for weakness were not effectively countered and they have accordingly developed their protests into a full-fledged pressure ^{campaign} concentrated in but by no means restricted to I Corps.

In the three weeks since Thi's ouster a serious situation has developed in which, at the present time, I corps cannot be said to be effectively under Saigon control, in which Buddhist instigated pressures are seriously threatening the stability and perhaps the actual survival of the present GVN, and in which anti-American and neutralist sentiments are being openly voiced.

III. THE PLAYERS

In the complex political game now being conducted in South Vietnam there are a wide variety of players or groups thereof each with divergent objectives, ambitions, and vested interests.

Ky and the Directory: General Ky and his immediate colleagues obviously want to stay in power, prosecute the war, and conduct the work of social development which they are sincerely if not always efficiently setting in motion. By and large the Directory seems to be hanging together (perhaps to avoid hanging separately) and for the time being at least Ky enjoys the unified, though not necessarily loyal, support of his immediate colleagues. Ky and his associates, however, are obviously disturbed and more than a little unsure of themselves. As indicated above, they keep changing their minds on the best course of action to follow. They are understandably anxious to avoid a head-on collision with the Buddhists or an unwise use of force capable of setting in train a course of events like those which led to Diem's downfall in 1963. It appears, however, that they may be allowing the obvious and very real need for prudence to serve as an excuse for counter-productive procrastination and indecision.

General Thi: Thi provided the occasion for this crisis but is no longer its central element. He obviously resents his ouster and is not disposed to exert himself to ease the problems of his former colleagues. So long as he remains in I Corps he will almost certainly serve as an irritant and visible symbol of the Ky government's

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inability to enforce execution of its orders. Throughout his career -- even in the 1960 coup attempt -- Thi has always been someone else's cat's paw, the front -- witting or unwitting -- for other peoples' political manipulations. He remains so today.

The Directory's Key Executive Agents: One of the chief contributors to the present crisis is the fact that Ky and his Directory colleagues have been poorly served, if not actually ill-served, by the chosen executive instruments of their decision to dismiss General Thi. General Chuan, as indicated above, is sitting on a fence. He talks loyalty to Saigon but so far has done nothing to assert or re-establish Saigon's authority in I Corps. There are good grounds for thinking that he personally is more anxious to be on the winning side than to discharge his present responsibilities as I Corps commander. The roles of MSS Chief Colonel Loan, and, particularly, of National Police Director, Colonel Pham Van Lieu, have been, if anything, even more ambivalent. Lieu has been the Ky government's principal go-between in its dealings with Thi but where Lieu's loyalties lie is very much an open question.

The I Corps Bureaucracy: Much of the agitation in I Corps has been not only encouraged but in some cases actually organized by key local officials. The Mayor of Danang, Nguyen Van Man, for example, seems to be the person who organized the "civilian and military struggle committee" which has become the spearhead of anti-GVN protests and demonstrations. Man has done nothing to curb the recurrent strikes which have plagued Danang and may well have been behind them. Bui Hoanh, the province chief of Quang Ngai, has been equally unhelpful. In fact, no I Corps provincial or military official has done anything effective to support the Saigon government.

"The Struggle Group": The most active, vocal and disturbing element in I Corps agitation has been the "struggle groups" and "committees" which have sprung up in Danang, Hue and elsewhere. By and large they seem to be composed of present or recent students, faculty members in I Corps schools (including Hue University) and junior civilian and military officials. They are encouraged and probably directed by Tri Quang's wing of the Buddhist movement. They could never have gotten off the ground without the at least tacit blessing of local officials, though it is not entirely clear if the latter

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could now curtail these groups' activities. It is the struggle groups who have taken over the Hue and Danang radio stations, led the demonstrations, put out increasingly anti-American propaganda themes, and begun to voice neutralist and anti-war sentiments.

The Buddhists: South Vietnam's Buddhist movement has considerably more to do with politics than with religion. It is not a tightly organized and disciplined body but it does have widespread support, particularly in youth and student circles. It bears some analogies to the civil rights movement in the U.S. in that it channels strong emotions, finds protest more congenial than constructive advocacy, and has a number of would-be leaders none of whom is willing to let another appear more militant than he. The two major factions within the Buddhist movement are those which coalesce around, respectively, Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam Chau. Tri Quang's faction is the better organized but is strongest in central Vietnam, including I Corps. Tam Chau's supporters are less well organized but are concentrated in the south, including Saigon, and hence give Tam Chau a voice about equal to that of Tri Quang on the national stage. All of the political Buddhists have been unhappy with the continuation of military rule, and are anxious for a return to civilian government. None, however, has ever been willing to articulate exactly what sort of civilian government he would like to see or whom he would like to have in positions of authority therein. Tam Chau appears prepared to give the Ky government at least some measure of support and assistance so long as it is tangibly forthcoming on the matter of progress of civilian rule. Tri Quang seems currently bent on taking a harder line.

No one has ever been able to divine exactly what Tri Quang wants and he himself would almost certainly be unwilling, if not unable, to spell out his goals with any degree of precision. He apparently does not want the responsibilities of office. He does want a veto power over GVN policies and personnel choices and appears determined to topple any government he cannot control. There is little doubt that Tri Quang is the real driving force behind present agitation, that in the aftermath of Thi's ouster he probed for weaknesses and thinks he has found them. He will almost certainly persist in his pressure until the Ky government falls or until he comes to believe that he cannot succeed and hence must ease off to avoid public defeat. A consummate political realist, he has a keen eye for his opponents'

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strengths as well as their weaknesses. He would undoubtedly like to see the present government fall but would almost certainly quiet down if he became convinced that it was going to survive.

Other Vietnamese Groups: In addition to the ones enumerated above, other Vietnamese groups and political figures are closely watching current developments and participating in current activity in various degrees. The Catholics by and large welcomed Thi's ouster and are prepared to give the government some measure of support, they would become even more inclined to provide such support if faced with a clear choice between the present regime and a Buddhist dominated successor. Nonetheless, they are restless and many would like to see a return to civilian rule. Similar sentiments are to be found among other political groups, especially those with ties to central Vietnam, such as some factions of the VNQDD. Southerners (i.e., Cochin Chinese) of all political and religious persuasions are irritated at the troubles caused in central Vietnam and hence are in some measure prepared to support the government, but do not care to wind up on what may prove to be the losing side.

The Communists: Present agitation is a windfall for the Viet Cong. None of the contending factions are now under Viet Cong control but there is little doubt that some of them have been penetrated by Communist elements. The slogans put out over Hue and Danang radios and appearing in struggle committee organized demonstrations are incorporating an increasing number of Communist propaganda themes, including ones directed against the Americans and designed to exacerbate Vietnamese/U.S. relations. Several sources have reported that the Viet Cong are encouraging their followers to take a hand in the current agitation and attempt to divert it to Communist ends. Given current tensions, the instinctive dislike for foreigners common to all Vietnamese but particularly strong in those of central origin, and the inevitable irritants produced by the large U.S. presence, the Viet Cong have a fertile field for disruptive propaganda and political action at the present time.

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IV. POSSIBLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

At the present time it is impossible to predict the outcome of South Vietnam's current political crisis. The future course of events is not now inevitable nor is it yet inexorably ordained. What happens next will depend on what various key individuals do, or fail to do, within the next few hours, days and weeks. Broadly speaking, however, events will probably follow one of five general courses: (1) The current crisis will be resolved in the near future by the present government which will emerge with enhanced prestige but with some alterations in formal structure and key personnel. (2) The crisis will drag on for several weeks with the present government in nominal control but with a tarnished image and ever decreasing authority. (3) A new government will come to power different in form and personnel but espousing similar political objectives -- e.g., prosecution of a war and opposition to Communist insurgency. (4) A new government of neutralist persuasion will come to power determined to end the war as soon as possible and invite the U.S. out of Vietnam. (5) South Vietnam will simply descend into a state of anarchy and will split up along corps and regional lines with no effective central control exerted from Saigon.

Survival of the Present Government: It is essential to realize that the "present government of South Vietnam" is the Directory, not General Ky or General Thieu. If the Directory survives, the government will survive. The Directory is and always has been a collegiate body which, collectively, holds supreme political authority. Ky will probably have to resign as premier but he can do so without shaking the fundamental structure of the government, particularly if he simply steps back to resume running the Air Force (which is what he has long said he wants to do anyway) and remains a member of the Directory. If this happens, the best person to succeed him as premier is probably General Chieu, or if he is assigned another post (see below), General Thang.

If the government -- i.e., the Directory -- is to survive without fatally damaged authority it must immediately initiate and effectively follow through a number of actions -- some preventive, some therapeutic, and some designed to seize the political initiative from the Buddhists by meeting their legitimate demands and, simultaneously, capturing the support and imagination of other political groups.

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(1) The government must prevent the future spread of unrest outside of I Corps. This can be achieved by an effective use of police authority, particularly in Saigon, embodying a judicious mixture of firmness and restraint. As yet the unrest and demonstrations outside of I Corps are not out of hand and the strength of the organization directing present unrest (particularly Tri Quang's Buddhists) is considerably weaker in Saigon than in I Corps. In this field, therefore, the government still has a little time, though not much.

(2) It must re-establish its authority over I Corps. This cannot be done by military force, particularly since word of the GVN's plans to use such force has already leaked out. Also it will simply have to be recognized that I Corps is always going to be a separate area -- more or less the personal fief of whoever is chosen as Corps Commander. Nevertheless, it is essential that the Saigon government re-establish the appearance of its authority and, above all, regain control of Hue and Danang radio stations and get the students off the streets. The best way to do this is to appoint a new I Corps Commander whom the Buddhists could not oppose at the outset and to whom they would have to give at least a minimal period of grace. In this context, the shrewdest stroke the government could make would be to recall General Duong Van ("Big") Minh from exile and make him Commander of I Corps. This would hoist Tri Quang's Buddhists on their own petard, and give them a government representative to whom they could not initially object. Putting "Big" Minh in I Corps has other advantages too: being outside of Saigon he would be less likely to constitute a political threat on the national level. Also, being a Cochinese, he does not have family roots in the center and hence could not create a personal satrapy in I Corps as easily as some general native to that area. If "Big" Minh is not available or acceptable, other possible choices for I Corps commander designed to achieve the same results are General Chieu, police director Col. Pham Van Lieu, or General Tran Van Don (though of all of these, Don is least likely to be acceptable to the Directory).

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(3) The government must show concrete forward motion toward the objective of re-establishing civilian rule. The best way to do this is to announce within the next few days -- and here the time factor is absolutely essential -- the establishment of a body charged with drafting a constitution. To pre-empt Tri Quang and meet his stated demands, the bulk of this body (say 60%) should be selected by the already existing elected provincial councils, though such council representation could be weighted on a population basis. (If it were, this could be presented as "true democracy," something Tri Quang would find it hard to oppose; though such weighting would in fact dilute the influence of his followers.) The balance of the body should be made up of members appointed by the Directory with an eye to insuring that all political groups in South Vietnam, including minority ones, are adequately represented. This body should be charged with drafting a constitution which would establish a legal base for a future government, the structure of that government, and an electoral procedure for setting it up. It should be announced as part of the package that the constitution written by this body would be submitted to "the people" for ratification by popular referendum. Once the constitution itself had been approved by "the people," provision would be made for holding the elections it required and, after their results were in, installing a government in conformity with the constitution's provisions.

The procedures here outlined would constitute a tangible plan, whose implementation would provide visible concrete progress toward a legal government under civilian control. Given Vietnamese politician's proclivity for haggling over clauses, however, this procedure would take at least a year, probably more, to complete. It should be announced that the present government will continue to hold power as a public trust until a new one can be chosen in conformity with the provisions of the constitution. Hence this procedure would give the present government at least a year's grace to continue its work of prosecuting the war and rebuilding a new Vietnamese society.

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(4) The government must in some measure save its face and preserve its image: Ky may have to resign, but if he does this must be presented as a realignment of responsibility within a continuing and unchanged political structure. General Thi must be gotten out of I Corps and, preferably, sent abroad for at least a short period of "medical treatment" to prove that the Directory is capable of making its rulings stick.

No one can guarantee that a plan such as that outlined above will necessarily work. It has a good chance of success, however, if its various provisions are immediately launched and resolutely followed through. If the Directory does not take action along these lines within the very near future, the situation will almost certainly deteriorate along one of the other four lines outlined above.

V. CONSEQUENCES

In assessing the impact of the current political crisis on U.S. interests it is essential to keep in mind a clear distinction between immediate or near-term consequences and the longer-term effects of current events. The present unrest is obviously unsettling, has damaged the prestige and international image of the Saigon government, given a propaganda and political action windfall to the Viet Cong, and provided fresh ammunition for domestic and international critics of U.S. policy. None of this, however, is necessarily permanent, fatal or, in the long run, even harmful if the current crisis results in the emergence of a stronger political structure with a greater command of civilian loyalties and a better legal basis for its rule.

The longer-term consequences of current events will depend on the way in which current troubles are resolved. It is not essential to U.S. interests that Ky remain as premier but is vastly preferable that the Directory remain in power and the essential structure of the Saigon government not be radically changed under pressure of political unrest. However, even if the present government should fall, our position and interests in Vietnam could still be preserved if the present government were replaced by a successor publicly dedicated to the objectives of prosecuting a war and building a free Vietnamese nation independent of Communist control. We would have to recognize that any such successor, at least at the outset, would probably be even less efficient

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than the present regime and that its emergence would be a considerable temporary setback for us. Nonetheless, given the background of the present crisis and the present state of political dynamics within South Vietnam, stresses and upheavals such as the one we are now witnessing are something for which we will simply have to be prepared, much as we obviously want to prevent them. The process of nation-building, balance-structuring, and institution-creating in the midst of a war will never be easy and will invariably be complicated by periods of extreme tension within non-Communist ranks.

U.S. interests would be adversely affected if the present crisis drags on much longer (e.g., for more than another week or two at most) even if the Directory and present regime remains nominally in power. The longer present unrest continues the more difficult it will be to effect a satisfactory resolution or create a stable successor to the present political structure. Also the longer it continues, the greater will be the risk of anarchy, dissolution of effective central authority, and the acquisition of power within some segment of the country (e.g., I Corps) by a neutralist-oriented group subject to Communist manipulation and control. These are real dangers to which we must be alert. They are not presently upon us, however, and we will stand a far better chance of preventing their emergence if we retain our sense of perspective and avoid premature panic.

VI. U.S. OPTIONS

A canvass of available U.S. options must also draw the distinction between immediate options and those available to us over the longer term. At the moment we have little choice but to continue the lines of activity in which we are presently engaged; touching base with and keeping tabs on all elements in the current crisis, working behind the scenes with the present government in an effort to strengthen its hand, exerting discreet pressure for forward movement on its part, and providing useful, concrete ideas for its consideration.

Over the longer-term, the U.S. has basically the three options of (1) continued close involvement in South Vietnamese political life, (2) disengaging from internal Vietnamese politics and focusing our whole attention on the military prosecution of the war and, (3) withdrawal from South Vietnam.

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Given the U.S. stake and present public posture, withdrawal is not a viable option at the present time. If we were to curtail our commitments now and look for a way out we would only be vindicating the arguments of those within the U.S. and abroad who are vociferously criticizing our present policy.

Assuming that we are to stay in Vietnam at least for the immediate future, disengagement from internal politics would be neither wise nor realistic since the struggle against the Communists could be lost politically by the South Vietnamese while our forces are defeating the Viet Cong on the field of battle. Were this to happen, our investment in lives, material resources and prestige would have been in vain.

For the time being, therefore, our only viable option is that of continued involvement in South Vietnamese political life. In operative terms this involvement entails the following factors:

(1) We must recognize and keep continually in mind the political impact of the U.S. physical presence in South Vietnam and the degree to which it excites the emotional sensibilities even of those who recognize the need for our support, are grateful for our help, and want desperately for us to remain in order that they may continue to exist as free men. Our actions will have to be marked by great delicacy, political finesse, and a continuing effort to make American influence and presence as unobtrusive as circumstances will permit.

(2) We must obtain some additional leverage over the Vietnamese and make them aware that our continued support is contingent upon some modicum of rational behavior on their part. Few Vietnamese are politically sophisticated in the international sense and most are prone -- for a variety of personal and emotional reasons -- to overrate the importance of Vietnam to the U.S. Tri Quang and General Thi, for example, have made it plain that they feel they can play political games in the midst of a war because they can always count on the United States to protect them from Communist control. We have got to disabuse influential Vietnamese figures of the belief that American public opinion


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will support our continued effort in Vietnam no matter what the Vietnamese themselves may do. Perhaps the best way to get this message across would be to bring key Vietnamese figures -- including perhaps even Tri Quang himself -- to the United States for orientation or lecture tours and force them to experience at firsthand the full measure of restlessness about Vietnam now prevalent in America. At a minimum if we cannot persuade such leaders as Tri Quang to come and see for themselves, we must arrange for persons whose reports they will credit to come to the United States and bring back a politically sobering message.

(3) The U.S. must avoid becoming too closely identified with any particular South Vietnamese institutional structure or politician and must avoid smothering emerging Vietnamese leaders in too close a public embrace. The timing of news announcements and policy statements, and the other public manifestations of joint endeavor must, wherever possible, be structured to downplay the fact that the Vietnamese are our dependent clients and build their image as independent allies.

(4) Finally, we must do all we can to foster nation-building in Vietnam and the emergence of a stable non-Communist social structure but we must avoid any attempt to force Vietnamese political development into an institutional framework fashioned in our image. Instead, we must encourage the Vietnamese to devise institutional mechanisms responsive to their needs, consonant with their traditions, and capable of reflecting the realities of political power within their social structure.

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